Unchosen Love

Ursula K. Le Guin

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Introduction

By Heokad'd Arhe of Inanan Farmhold of Tag Village on the Southwest Watershed of the Budran River on Okets on the Planet O.

Sex, for everybody, on every world, is a complicated business, but nobody seems to have complicated marriage quite as much as my people have. To us, of course, it seems simple, and so natural that it's foolish to describe it, like trying to describe how we walk, how we breathe. Well, you know, you stand on one leg and move the other one forward…you let the air come into your lungs and then you let it out…you marry a man and woman from the other moiety…

What is a moiety? a Gethenian asked me, and I realised that it's easier for me to imagine not knowing which sex I'll be tomorrow morning, like the Gethenian, than to imagine not knowing whether I was a Morning person or an Evening person. So complete, so universal a division of humanity—how can there be a society without it? How do you know who anyone is? How can you give worship without the one to ask and the other to answer, the one to pour and the other to drink? How can you couple indiscriminately without regard to incest? I have to admit that in the unswept, unenlightened basements of my hindbrain I agree with my great-uncle Gambat, who said, "Those people from off the world, they all try to stand on one leg. Two legs, two sexes, two moieties—it only makes sense!"

A moiety is half a population. We call our two halves the Morning and the Evening. If your mother's a Morning woman, you're a Morning person; and all Morning people are in certain respects your brothers or sisters. You have sex, marry, have children only with Evening people.

When I explained our concept of incest to a fellow student on Hain, she said, shocked, "But that means you can't have sex with half the population!" And I in turn said, shocked, "Do you *want* sex with half the population?"

Moieties are in fact not an uncommon social structure within the Ekumen. I have had comfortable conversations with people from

several bipartite societies. One of them, a Nadir Woman of the Umna on Ithsh, nodded and laughed when I told her my great-uncle's opinion. "But you ki'O," she said, "you marry on all fours."

Few people from other worlds are willing to believe that our form of marriage works. They prefer to think that we endure it. They forget that human beings, while whining after the simple life, thrive on complexity.

When I marry—for love, for stability, for children—I marry three people. I am a Morning man: I marry an Evening woman and an Evening man, with both of whom I have a sexual relationship, and a Morning woman, with whom I have no sexual relationship. Her sexual relationships are with the Evening man and the Evening woman. The whole marriage is called a sedoretu. Within it there are four submarriages; the two heterosexual pairs are called Morning and Evening, according to the woman's moiety; the male homosexual pair is called the Night marriage, and the female homosexual pair is called the Day.

Brothers and sisters of the four primary people can join the sedoretu, so that the number of people in the marriage sometimes gets to six or seven. The children are variously related as siblings, germanes, and cousins.

Clearly a sedoretu takes some arranging. We spend a lot of our time arranging them. How much of a marriage is founded on love and in which couples the love is strongest, how much of it is founded on convenience, custom, profit, friendship, will depend on regional tradition, personal character, and so on. The complexities are so evident that I am always surprised when an offworlder sees, in the multiple relationship, only the forbidden, the illicit one. "How can you be married to three people and never have sex with one of them?" they ask.

The question makes me uncomfortable; it seems to assume that sexuality is a force so dominant that it cannot be contained or shaped by any other relationship. Most societies expect a father and daughter, or a brother and sister, to have a nonsexual family relationship, though I gather that in some the incest ban is often violated by people empowered by age and gender to ignore it. Evidently such societies see human beings as divided into two kinds, the fundamental division being power, and they grant one gender superior power. To us, the fundamental division is moiety; gender is a great but secondary difference; and in the search for power no one starts from a position of innate privilege. It certainly leads to our looking at things differently.

The fact is, the people of O admire the simple life as much as anyone else, and we have found our own peculiar way of achieving it. We are conservative, conventional, self-righteous, and dull. We

suspect change and resist it blindly. Many houses, farms, and shrines on O have been in the same place and called by the same name for fifty or sixty centuries, some for hundreds of centuries. We have mostly been doing the same things in the same way for longer than that. Evidently, we do things carefully. We honor self-restraint, often to the point of harboring demons, and are fierce in defense of our privacy. We despise the outstanding. The wise among us do not live in solitude on mountain tops; they live in houses on farms, have many relatives, and keep careful accounts. We have no cities, only dispersed villages composed of a group of farmholds and a community center; educational and technological centers are supported by each region. We do without gods and, for a long time now, without wars. The question strangers most often ask us is, "In those marriages of yours, do you all go to bed together?" and the answer we give is, "No."

That is in fact how we tend to answer any question from a stranger. It is amazing that we ever got into the Ekumen. We are near Hain—sidereally near, 4.2 light years—and the Hainish simply kept coming here and talking to us for centuries, until we got used to them and were able to say Yes. The Hainish, of course, are our ancestral race, but the stolid longevity of our customs makes them feel young and rootless and dashing. That is probably why they like us.

Unchosen Love

There was a hold down near the mouths of the Saduun, built on a rock island that stands up out of the great tidal plain south of where the river meets the sea. The sea used to come in and swirl around the island, but as the Saduun slowly built up its delta over the centuries, only the great tides reached it, and then only the storm tides, and at last the sea never came so far, but lay shining all along the west.

Meruo was never a farmhold; built on rock in a salt marsh, it was a seahold, and lived by fishing. When the sea withdrew, the people dug a channel from the foot of the rock to the tideline. Over the years, as the sea withdrew farther, the channel grew longer and longer, till it was a broad canal three miles long. Up and down it fishing boats and trading ships went to and from the docks of Meruo that sprawled over the rocky base of the island. Right beside the docks and the netyards and the drying and freezing plants began the prairies of saltgrass, where vast flocks of yama and flightless baro grazed. Meruo rented out those pastures to farmholds of Sadahun Village in the coastal hills. None of the flocks belonged to Meruo, whose people looked only to the sea, and farmed only the sea, and never walked if they could sail. More than the fishing, it was the prairies that had made them rich, but

they spent their wealth on boats and on digging and dredging the great canal. We throw our money in the sea, they said.

They were known as a stiff-necked lot, holding themselves apart from the village. Meruo was a big hold, often with a hundred people living in it, so they seldom made sedoretu with village people, but married one another. They're all germanes at Meruo, the villagers said.

A Morning man from eastern Oket came to stay in Sadahun, studying saltmarsh grazing for his farmhold on the other coast. He chanced to meet a Evening man of Meruo named Suord, in town for a village meeting. The next day, there came Suord again, to see him; and the next day too; and by the fourth night Suord was making love to him, sweeping him off his feet like a storm-wave. The Easterner, whose name was Hadri, was a modest, inexperienced young man to whom the journey and the unfamiliar places and the strangers he met had been a considerable adventure. Now he found one of the strangers wildly in love with him, beseeching him to come out to Meruo and stay there, live there—"We'll make a sedoretu," Suord said. "There's half a dozen Evening girls. Any, any of the Morning women, I'd marry any one of them to keep you. Come out, come out with me, come out onto the Rock!" For so the people of Meruo called their hold.

Hadri thought he owed it to Suord to do what he asked, since Suord loved him so passionately. He got up his courage, packed his bag, and went out across the wide, flat prairies to the place he had seen all along dark against the sky far off, the high roofs of Meruo, hunched up on its rock above its docks and warehouses and boat-basin, its windows looking away from the land, staring always down the long canal to the sea that had forsaken it.

Suord brought him in and introduced him to the household, and Hadri was terrified. They were all like Suord, dark people, handsome, fierce, abrupt, intransigent—so much alike that he could not tell one from the other and mistook daughter for mother, brother for cousin, Evening for Morning. They were barely polite to him. He was an interloper. They were afraid Suord would bring him in among them for good. And so was he.

Suord's passion was so intense that Hadri, a moderate soul, assumed it must burn out soon. "Hot fires don't last," he said to himself, and took comfort in the adage. "He'll get tired of me and I can go," he thought, not in words. But he stayed a tenday at Meruo, and a month, and Suord burned as hot as ever. Hadri saw too that among the sedoretu of the household there were many passionate matings, sexual tensions running among them like a network of ungrounded wires, filling the air with the crackle and spark of electricity; and some of these marriages were many years old.

He was flattered and amazed at Suord's insatiable, yearning, worshipping desire for a person Hadri himself was used to considering as quite ordinary. He felt his response to such passion was never enough. Suord's dark beauty filled his mind, and his mind turned away, looking for emptiness, a space to be alone. Some nights, when Suord lay flung out across the bed in deep sleep after lovemaking, Hadri would get up, naked, silent; he would sit in the windowseat across the room, gazing down the shining of the long canal under the stars. Sometimes he wept silently. He cried because he was in pain, but he did not know what the pain was.

One such night in early winter his feeling of being chafed, rubbed raw, like an animal fretting in a trap, all his nerve-ends exposed, was too much to endure. He dressed, very quietly for fear of waking Suord, and went barefoot out of their room, to get outdoors—anywhere out from under the roofs, he thought. He felt that he could not breathe.

The immense house was bewildering in the dark. The seven sedoretu living there now had each their own wing or floor or suite of rooms, all spacious. He had never even been into the regions of the First and Second Sedoretu, way off in the south wing, and always got confused in the ancient central part of the house, but he thought he knew his way around these floors in the north wing. This corridor, he thought, led to the landward stairs. It led only to narrow stairs going up. He went up them into a great shadowy attic, and found a door out onto the roof itself.

A long railed walk led along the south edge. He followed it, the peaks of the roofs rising up like black mountains to his left, and the prairies, the marshes, and then as he came round to the west side, the canal, all lying vast and dim in starlight below. The air was soft and damp, smelling of rain to come. A low mist was coming up from the marshes. As he watched, his arms on the rail, the mist thickened and whitened, hiding the marshes and the canal. He welcomed that softness, that slowness of the blurring, healing, concealing fog. A little peace and solace came into him. He breathed deep and thought, "Why, why am I so sad? Why don't I love Suord as much as he loves me? Why does he love me?"

He felt somebody was near him, and looked round. A woman had come out onto the roof and stood only a few yards away, her arms on the railing like his, barefoot like him, in a long dressing-gown. When he turned his head, she turned hers, looking at him.

She was one of the women of the Rock, no mistaking the dark skin and straight black hair and a certain fine cut of brow, cheekbone, jaw; but which one he was not sure. At the dining rooms of the north wing he had met a number of Evening women in their twenties, all sisters, cousins, or germanes, all unmarried. He was afraid of them all,

because Suord might propose one of them as his wife in sedoretu. Hadri was a little shy sexually and found the gender difference hard to cross; he had found his pleasure and solace mostly with other young men, though some women attracted him very much. These women of Meruo were powerfully attractive, but he could not imagine himself touching one of them. Some of the pain he suffered here was caused by the distrustful coldness of the Evening women, always making it clear to him that he was the outsider. They scorned him and he avoided them. And so he was not perfectly certain which one was Sasni, which one was Lamateo, or Saval, or Esbuai.

He thought this was Esbuai, because she was tall, but he wasn't sure. The darkness might excuse him, for one could barely make out the features of a face. He murmured, "Good evening," and said no name.

There was a long pause, and he thought resignedly that a woman of Meruo would snub him even in the dead of night on a rooftop.

But then she said, "Good evening," softly, with a laugh in her voice, and it was a soft voice, that lay on his mind the way the fog did, mild and cool. "Who is that?" she said.

"Hadri," he said, resigned again. Now she knew him and would snub him.

"Hadri? You aren't from here."

Who was she, then?

He said his farmhold name. "I'm from the east, from the Fadan'n Watershed. Visiting."

"I've been away," she said. "I just came back. Tonight. Isn't it a lovely night? I like these nights best of all, when the fog comes up, like a sea of its own…"

Indeed the mists had joined and risen, so that Meruo on its rock seemed to float suspended in darkness over a faintly luminous void.

"I like it too," he said. "I was thinking…" Then he stopped.

"What?" she said after a minute, so gently that he took courage and went on.

"That being unhappy in a room is worse than being unhappy out of doors," he said, with a self-conscious and unhappy laugh. "I wonder why that is."

"I knew," she said. "By the way you were standing. I'm sorry. What do you…what would you need to make you happier?" At first he had thought her older than himself, but now she spoke like a quite young girl, shy and bold at the same time, awkwardly, with sweetness. It was the dark and the fog that made them both bold, released them, so they could speak truly.

"I don't know," he said. "I think I don't know how to be in love."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because I—It's Suord, he brought me here," he told her, trying to go on speaking truly. "I do love him, but not—not the way he deserves —"

"Suord," she said thoughtfully.

"He is strong. Generous. He gives me everything he is, his whole life. But I'm not, I'm not able to…"

"Why do you stay?" she asked, not accusingly, but asking for an answer.

"I love him," Hadri said. "I don't want to hurt him. If I run away I'll be a coward. I want to be worth him." They were four separate answers, each spoken separately, painfully.

"Unchosen love," she said with a dry, rough tenderness. "Oh, it's hard."

She did not sound like a girl now, but like a woman who knew what love is. While they talked they had both looked out westward over the sea of mist, because it was easier to talk that way. She turned now to look at him again. He was aware of her quiet gaze in the darkness. A great star shone bright between the line of the roof and her head. When she moved again her round, dark head occulted the star, and then it shone tangled in her hair, as if she was wearing it. It was a lovely thing to see.

"I always thought I'd choose love," he said at last, her words working in his mind. "Choose a sedoretu, settle down, some day, somewhere near my farm. I never imagined anything else. And then I came out here, to the edge of the world…And I don't know what to do. I was chosen, I can't choose…"

There was a little self-mockery in his voice.

"This is a strange place," he said.

"It is," she said. "Once you've seen the great tide…"

He had seen it once. Suord had taken him to a headland that stood above the southern floodplain. Though it was only a few miles southwest of Meruo, they had to go a long way round inland and then back out west again, and Hadri asked, "Why can't we just go down the coast?"

"You'll see why," Suord said. They sat up on the rocky headland eating their picnic, Suord always with an eye on the brown-grey mud flats stretching off to the western horizon, endless and dreary, cut by a few worming, silted channels. "Here it comes," he said, standing up; and Hadri stood up to see the gleam and hear the distant thunder, see the advancing bright line, the incredible rush of the tide across the immense plain for seven miles till it crashed in foam on the rocks below them and flooded on round the headland.

"A good deal faster than you could run," Suord said, his dark face keen and intense. "That's how it used to come in around our Rock. In

the old days."

"Are we cut off here?" Hadri had asked, and Suord had answered, "No, but I wish we were."

Thinking of it now, Hadri imagined the broad sea lying under the fog all around Meruo, lapping on the rocks, under the walls. As it had been in the old days.

"I suppose the tides cut Meruo off from the mainland," he said, and she said, "Twice every day."

"Strange," he murmured, and heard her slight intaken breath of laughter.

"Not at all," she said. "Not if you were born here…Do you know that babies are born and the dying die on what they call the lull? The low point of the low tide of morning."

Her voice and words made his heart clench within him, they were so soft and seemed so strange. "I come from inland, from the hills, I never saw the sea before," he said. "I don't know anything about the tides."

"Well," she said, "there's their true love." She was looking behind him. He turned and saw the waning moon just above the sea of mist, only its darkest, scarred crescent showing. He stared at it, unable to say anything more.

"Hadri," she said, "don't be sad. It's only the moon. Come up here again if you are sad, though. I liked talking with you. There's nobody here to talk to…Good night," she whispered. She went away from him along the walk and vanished in the shadows.

He stayed a while watching the mist rise and the moon rise; the mist won the slow race, blotting out moon and all in a cold dimness at last. Shivering, but no longer tense and anguished, he found his way back to Suord's room and slid into the wide, warm bed. As he stretched out to sleep, he thought, I don't know her name.

Suord woke in an unhappy mood. He insisted that Hadri come out in the sailboat with him down the canal, to check the locks on the side-canals, he said; but what he wanted was to get Hadri alone, in a boat, where Hadri was not only useless but slightly uneasy and had no escape at all. They drifted in the mild sunshine on the glassy side-canal. "You want to leave, don't you," Suord said, speaking as if the sentence was a knife that cut his tongue as he spoke it.

"No," Hadri said, not knowing if it was true, but unable to say any other word.

"You don't want to get married here."

"I don't know, Suord."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I don't think any of the Evening women want a marriage with me," he said, and trying to speak true, "I know they don't. They want

you to find somebody from around here. I'm a foreigner."

"They don't know you," Suord said with a sudden, pleading gentleness. "People here, they take a long time to get to know people. We've lived too long on our Rock. Seawater in our veins instead of blood. But they'll see—they'll come to know you if you—If you'll stay —" He looked out over the side of the boat and after a while said almost inaudibly, "If you leave, can I come with you?"

"I'm not leaving," Hadri said. He went and stroked Suord's hair and face and kissed him. He knew that Suord could not follow him, couldn't live in Oket, inland; it wouldn't work, it wouldn't do. But that meant he must stay here with Suord. There was a numb coldness in him, under his heart.

"Sasni and Duun are germanes," Suord said presently, sounding like himself again, controlled, intense. "They've been lovers ever since they were thirteen. Sasni would marry me if I asked her, if she can have Duun in the Day marriage. We can make a sedoretu with them, Hadri."

The numbness kept Hadri from reacting to this for some time; he did not know what he was feeling, what he thought. What he finally said was, "Who is Duun?" There was a vague hope in him that it was the woman he had talked with on the roof, last night—in a different world, it seemed, a realm of fog and darkness and truth.

"You know Duun."

"Did she just come back from somewhere else?"

"No," Suord said, too intent to be puzzled by Hadri's stupidity. "Sasni's germane, Lasudu's daughter of the Fourth Sedoretu. She's short, very thin, doesn't talk much."

"I don't know her," Hadri said in despair, "I can't tell them apart, they don't talk to me," and he bit his lip and stalked over to the other end of the boat and stood with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders hunched.

Suord's mood had quite changed; he splashed about happily in the water and mud when they got to the lock, making sure the mechanisms were in order, then sailed them back to the great canal with a fine following wind. Shouting, "Time you got your sea legs!" to Hadri, he took the boat west down the canal and out onto the open sea. The misty sunlight, the breeze full of salt spray, the fear of the depths, the exertion of working the boat under Suord's capable directions, the triumph of steering it back into the canal at sunset, when the light lay red-gold on the water and vast flocks of stilts and marshbirds rose crying and circling around them—it made a great day, after all, for Hadri.

But the glory dropped away as soon as he came under the roofs of Meruo again, into the dark corridors and the low, wide, dark rooms

that all looked west. They took meals with the Fourth and Fifth Sedoretu. In Hadri's farmhold there would have been a good deal of teasing when they came in just in time for dinner, having been out all day without notice and done none of the work of it; here nobody ever teased or joked. If there was resentment it stayed hidden. Maybe there was no resentment, maybe they all knew each other so well and were so much of a piece that they trusted one other the way you trust your own hands, without question. Even the children joked and quarrelled less than Hadri was used to. Conversation at the long table was always quiet, many not speaking a word.

As he served himself, Hadri looked around among them for the woman of last night. Had it in fact been Esbuai? He thought not; the height was like, but Esbuai was very thin, and had a particularly arrogant carriage to her head. The woman was not here. Maybe she was First Sedoretu. Which of these women was Duun?

That one, the little one, with Sasni; he recalled her now. She was always with Sasni. He had never spoken to her, because Sasni of them all had snubbed him most hatefully, and Duun was her shadow.

"Come on," said Suord, and went round the table to sit down beside Sasni, gesturing Hadri to sit beside Duun. He did so. I'm Suord's shadow, he thought.

"Hadri says he's never talked to you," Suord said to Duun. The girl hunched up a bit and muttered something meaningless. Hadri saw Sasni's face flash with anger, and yet there was a hint of a challenging smile in it, as she looked straight at Suord. They were very much alike. They were well matched.

Suord and Sasni talked—about the fishing, about the locks—while Hadri ate his dinner. He was ravenous after the day on the water. Duun, having finished her meal, sat and said nothing. These people had a capacity for remaining perfectly motionless and silent, like predatory animals, or fishing birds. The dinner was fish, of course; it was always fish. Meruo had been wealthy once and still had the manners of wealth, but few of the means. Dredging out the great canal took more of their income every year, as the sea relentlessly pulled back from the delta. Their fishing fleet was large, but the boats were old, often rebuilt. Hadri had asked why they did not build new ones, for a big shipyard loomed above the drydocks; Suord explained that the cost of the wood alone was prohibitive. Having only the one crop, fish and shellfish, they had to pay for all other food, for clothing, for wood, even for water. The wells for miles around Meruo were salt. An aqueduct led to the seahold from the village in the hills.

They drank their expensive water from silver cups, however, and ate their eternal fish from bowls of ancient, translucent blue Edia ware, which Hadri was always afraid of breaking when he washed

them.

Sasni and Suord went on talking, and Hadri felt stupid and sullen, sitting there saying nothing to the girl who said nothing.

"I was out on the sea for the first time today," he said, feeling the blood flush his face.

She made some kind of noise, mhm, and gazed at her empty bowl.

"Can I get you some soup?" Hadri asked. They ended the meal with broth, here, fish broth of course.

"No," she said, with a scowl.

"In my farmhold," he said, "people often bring dishes to each other; it's a minor kind of courtesy; I am sorry if you find it offensive." He stood up and strode off to the sideboard, where with shaking hands he served himself a bowl of soup. When he got back Suord was looking at him with a speculative eye and a faint smile, which he resented. What did they take him for? Did they think he had no standards, no people, no place of his own? Let them marry each other, he would have no part of it. He gulped his soup, got up without waiting for Suord, and went to the kitchen, where he spent an hour in the washing-up crew to make up for missing his time in the cooking crew. Maybe they had no standards about things, but he did.

Suord was waiting for him in their room—Suord's room—Hadri had no room of his own here. That in itself was insulting, unnatural. In a decent hold, a guest was always given a room.

Whatever Suord said—he could not remember later what it was—was a spark to blasting-powder. "I will not be treated this way!" he cried passionately, and Suord firing up at once demanded what he meant, and they had at it, an explosion of rage and frustration and accusation that left them staring grey-faced at each other, appalled. "Hadri," Suord said, the name a sob; he was shivering, his whole body shaking. They came together, clinging to each other. Suord's small, rough, strong hands held Hadri close. The taste of Suord's skin was salt as the sea. Hadri sank, sank and was drowned.

But in the morning everything was as it had been. He did not dare ask for a room to himself, knowing it would hurt Suord. If they do make this sedoretu, then at least I'll have a room, said a small, unworthy voice in his head. But it was wrong, wrong…

He looked for the woman he had met on the roof, and saw half a dozen who might have been her and none he was certain was her. Would she not look at him, speak to him? Not in daylight, not in front of the others? Well, so much for her, then.

It occurred to him only now that he did not know whether she was a woman of the Morning or the Evening. But what did it matter?

That night the fog came in. Waking suddenly, deep in the night,

he saw out the window only a formless grey, glowing very dimly with diffused light from a window somewhere in another wing of the house. Suord slept, as he always did, flat out, lying like a bit of jetsam flung on the beach of the night, utterly absent and abandoned. Hadri watched him with an aching tenderness for a while. Then he got up, pulled on clothes, and found the corridor to the stairs that led up to the roof.

The mist hid even the roof-peaks. Nothing at all was visible over the railing. He had to feel his way along, touching the railing. The wooden walkway was damp and cold to the soles of his feet. Yet a kind of happiness had started in him as he went up the attic stairs, and it grew as he breathed the foggy air, and as he turned the corner to the west side of the house. He stood still a while and then spoke, almost in a whisper. "Are you there?" he said.

There was a pause, as there had been the first time he spoke to her, and then she answered, the laugh just hidden in her voice, "Yes, I'm here. Are you there?"

The next moment they could see each other, though only as shapes bulking in the mist.

"I'm here," he said. His happiness was absurd. He took a step closer to her, so that he could make out her dark hair, the darkness of her eyes in the lighter oval of her face. "I wanted to talk to you again," he said.

"I wanted to talk to you again," she said.

"I couldn't find you. I hoped you'd speak to me."

"Not down there," she said, her voice turning light and cold.

"Are you in the First Sedoretu?"

"Yes," she said. "The Morning wife of the First Sedoretu of Meruo. My name is An'nad. I wanted to know if you're still unhappy."

"Yes," he said, "no—" He tried to see her face more clearly, but there was little light. "Why is it that you talk to me, and I can talk to you, and not to anybody else in this household?" he said. "Why are you the only kind one?"

"Is—Suord unkind?" she asked, with a little hesitation on the name.

"He never means to be. He never is. Only he—he drags me, he pushes me, he…He's stronger than I am."

"Maybe not," said An'nad, "maybe only more used to getting his way."

"Or more in love," Hadri said, low-voiced, with shame.

"You're not in love with him?"

"Oh yes!"

She laughed.

"I never knew anyone like him—he's more than—his feelings are

so deep, he's—I'm out of my depth," Hadri stammered. "But I love him—immensely—"

"So what's wrong?"

"He wants to marry," Hadri said, and then stopped. He was talking about her household, probably her blood kin; as a wife of the First Sedoretu she was part of all the network of relationships of Meruo. What was he blundering into?

"Who does he want to marry?" she asked. "Don't worry. I won't interfere. Is the trouble that you don't want to marry him?"

"No, no," Hadri said. "It's only—I never meant to stay here, I thought I'd go home…Marrying Suord seems—more than I, than I deserve—But it would be amazing, it would be wonderful! But…the marriage itself, the sedoretu, it's not right. He says that Sasni will marry him, and Duun will marry me, so that she and Duun can be married."

"Suord and Sasni," again the faint pause on the name, "don't love each other, then?"

"No," he said, a little hesitant, remembering that challenge between them, like a spark struck.

"And you and Duun?"

"I don't even know her."

"Oh, no, that is dishonest," An'nad said. "One should choose love, but not that way…Whose plan is it? All three of them?"

"I suppose so. Suord and Sasni have talked about it. The girl, Duun, she never says anything."

"Talk to her," said the soft voice. "Talk to her, Hadri." She was looking at him; they stood quite close together, close enough that he felt the warmth of her arm on his arm though they did not touch.

"I'd rather talk to you," he said, turning to face her. She moved back, seeming to grow insubstantial even in that slight movement, the fog was so dense and dark. She put out her hand, but again did not quite touch him. He knew she was smiling.

"Then stay and talk with me," she said, leaning again on the rail. "Tell me…oh, tell me anything. What do you do, you and Suord, when you're not making love?"

"We went out sailing," he said, and found himself telling her what it had been like for him out on the open sea for the first time, his terror and delight. "Can you swim?" she asked, and he laughed and said, "In the lake at home, it's not the same," and she laughed and said, "No, I imagine not." They talked a long time, and he asked her what she did—"in daylight. I haven't seen you yet, down there."

"No," she said. "What do I do? Oh, I worry about Meruo, I suppose. I worry about my children…I don't want to think about that now. How did you come to meet Suord?"

Before they were done talking the mist had begun to lighten very faintly with moonrise. It had grown piercingly cold. Hadri was shivering. “Go on,” she said. “I’m used to it. Go on to bed.”

“There’s frost,” he said, “look,” touching the silvered wooden rail. “You should go down too.”

“I will. Good night, Hadri.” As he turned she said, or he thought she said, “I’ll wait for the tide.”

“Good night, An’nad.” He spoke her name huskily, tenderly. If only the others were like her…

He stretched himself out close to Suord’s inert, delicious warmth, and slept.

The next day Suord had to work in the records office, where Hadri was utterly useless and in the way. Hadri took his chance, and by asking several sullen, snappish women, found where Duun was: in the fish-drying plant. He went down to the docks and found her, by luck, if it was luck, eating her lunch alone in the misty sunshine at the edge of the boat basin.

“I want to talk with you,” he said.

“What for?” she said. She would not look at him.

“Is it honest to marry a person you don’t even like in order to marry a person you love?”

“No,” she said fiercely. She kept looking down. She tried to fold up the bag she had carried her lunch in, but her hands shook too much.

“Why are you willing to do it, then?”

“Why are *you* willing to do it?”

“I’m not,” he said. “It’s Suord. And Sasni.”

She nodded.

“Not you?”

She shook her head violently. Her thin, dark face was a very young face, he realised.

“But you love Sasni,” he said a little uncertainly.

“Yes! I love Sasni! I always did, I always will! That doesn’t mean I, I, I have to do everything she says, everything she wants, that I have to, that I have to—” She was looking at him now, right at him, her face burning like a coal, her voice quivering and breaking. “I don’t *belong* to Sasni!”

“Well,” he said, “I don’t belong to Suord, either.”

“I don’t know anything about men,” Duun said, still glaring at him. “Or any other women. Or anything. I never was with anybody but Sasni, all my life! She thinks she *owns* me.”

“She and Suord are a lot alike,” Hadri said cautiously.

There was a silence. Duun, though tears had spouted out of her eyes in the most childlike fashion, did not deign to wipe them away.

She sat straight-backed, cloaked in the dignity of the women of Meruo, and managed to get her lunch-bag folded.

"I don't know very much about women," Hadri said. His was perhaps a simpler dignity. "Or men. I know I love Suord. But I…I need freedom."

"Freedom!" she said, and he thought at first she was mocking him, but quite the opposite—she burst right into tears, and put her head down on her knees, sobbing aloud. "I do too," she cried, "I do too."

Hadri put out a timid hand and stroked her shoulder. "I didn't mean to make you cry," he said. "Don't cry, Duun. Look. If we, if we feel the same way, we can work something out. We don't have to get married. We can be friends."

She nodded, though she went on sobbing for a while. At last she raised her swollen face and looked at him with wet-lidded, luminous eyes. "I would like to have a friend," she said. "I never had one."

"I only have one other one here," he said, thinking how right she had been in telling him to talk to Duun. "An'nad."

She stared at him. "Who?"

"An'nad. The Morning woman of the First Sedoretu."

"What do you mean?" She was not scornful, merely very surprised. "That's Teheo."

"Then who is An'nad?"

"She was the Morning woman of the First Sedoretu four hundred years ago," the girl said, her eyes still on Hadri's, clear and puzzled.

"Tell me," he said.

"She was drowned—here, at the foot of the Rock. They were all down on the sands, her sedoretu, with the children. That was when the tides had begun not to come in as far as Meruo. They were all out on the sands, planning the canal, and she was up in the house. She saw there was a storm in the west, and the wind might bring one of the great tides. She ran down to warn them. And the tide did come in, all the way round the Rock, the way it used to. They all kept ahead of it, except An'nad. She was drowned…"

With all he had to wonder about then, about An'nad, and about Duun, he did not wonder why Duun answered his question and asked him none.

It was not until much later, half a year later, that he said, "Do you remember when I said I'd met An'nad—that first time we talked—by the boat basin?"

"I remember," she said.

They were in Hadri's room, a beautiful, high room with windows looking east, traditionally occupied by a member of the Eighth Sedoretu. Summer morning sunlight warmed their bed, and a soft,

earth-scented land-wind blew in the windows.

"Didn't it seem strange?" he asked. His head was pillowed on her shoulder. When she spoke he felt her warm breath in his hair.

"Everything was so strange then…I don't know. And anyhow, if you've heard the tide…"

"The tide?"

"Winter nights. Up high in the house, in the attics. You can hear the tide come in, and crash around the Rock, and run on inland to the hills. At the true high tide. But the sea is miles away…"

Suord knocked, waited for their invitation, and came in, already dressed. "Are you still in bed? Are we going into town or not?" he demanded, splendid in his white summer coat, imperious. "Sasni's already down in the courtyard."

"Yes, yes, we're just getting up," they said, secretly entwining further.

"Now!" he said, and went out.

Hadri sat up, but Duun pulled him back down. "You saw her? You talked with her?"

"Twice. I never went back after you told me who she was. I was afraid…Not of her. Only afraid she wouldn't be there."

"What did she do?" Duun asked softly.

"She saved us from drowning," Hadri said.